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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000502

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT HALTS HAVANA'S FIRST GAY PRIDE MARCH

Classified By: COM: Michael E. Parmly : For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: On June 25 a coalition of homosexual rights groups planned to hold a "Gay Pride" march from a park in Central Havana to the Ministry of Justice. At the Ministry they planned to present a petition demanding an end to discrimination, better treatment of AIDS patients and an end to police harassment and brutality. However, police detained the two leaders of the march in the early morning. Police did not allow Aliomar Janjaque to leave his home while they held Ignacio Estrada Cepero at a police station for several hours. The absence of the leaders coupled with a heavy presence of police around the park dissuaded the other participants from entering the area. Only one marcher appeared and made a statement to the international press. This is further proof that the Cuban government acts quickly to suppress any type of peaceful protest. End summary.

¶2. (C) A coalition of several homosexual rights groups, including the Cuban Foundation against AIDS, the Elena Mederos Foundation, Foundation LGBT Reinaldo Arenas, the Havana Transsexual Collective, and the Cuban Movement for Gay Liberation, organized a heavily publicized Gay Pride march for June 25. All of these groups have asked for official status from the government, as well as interviews with Mariela Castro, the daughter of Raul, who heads the GOC Center for Sexual Education (CENESEX). All of the groups have said that the government has never responded to their requests.

¶3. (C) The march was supposed to leave from a park in central Havana and proceed to the Ministry of Justice, where the march organizers, Aliomar Janjaque and Ignacio Estrada Cepero, intended to present a series of demands. The demands included the end of discrimination in education and places of employment, better treatment of AIDS patients, an end to police harassment and brutality, an apology for the mistreatment of homosexuals in the 1960's, and freedom for the prisoner, Jordany Tamayo Aldama. Tamayo, an advocate for the right of homosexuals to associate in public, is serving a seven year term for disrespect for the Head of State, because he called Fidel Castro "homophobic."

¶4. (C) On the morning of June 25, police prevented Janjaque from leaving his house and took Estrada to a police station. Both were held until noon and then released without charges. Janjaque told Poloff that the police detained nine others who planned to participate in the march. Independent journalist

Carlos Serpa and Foundation LGBT Reinaldo Arenas member Mario Jose Delgado stated that, in the area of the park, there was a heavy presence of police and members of the "Rapid Response Brigade", a group of civilians the GOC engages to stop protest activities and harass dissidents. The absence of the organizers and the fact that the police and security forces were out in force intimidated most potential marchers. Only Delgado and one other marcher appeared in the park. Delgado made a statement to the many members of the international press that were present. Both Delgado and Serpa told Poloff that reports in the media in Florida that violence was used against the protesters are false.

15. (C) Catholic Cardinal Jaime Ortega got involved in the discussion, if not in the decision to suspend the march. Commenting on an article on the homosexuality phenomenon in Cuba, published in this month's Catholic monthly review "Palabra Nueva", Ortega underlined his and the Church's objection to what he saw as the Cuban regime's "promoting" of homosexual behavior. Ortega pointed especially to reports he had received of primary and secondary school teachers instructing their students that sexual preference was a matter of personal choice. The "Palabra Nueva" article was at pains to say that homosexuals should not be persecuted for their identity, and Ortega echoed the point, but in conversation with COM on 26 June, he went on to emphasize his belief that some in high levels of the GOC -- "and not just Mariela Castro, although she is the leader" -- actively support increased visibility and promotion of homosexual behavior. (Comment: Ortega has some grounds for his belief. The UNEAC Congress of Cuban writers and intellectuals in April, for example, gave considerable prominence to the theme

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of fighting homophobia. The Congress was in fact chaired by two of Cuba's most prominent and openly declared homosexual activists.)

16. (C) Comment: In the past years several very vocal homosexual rights organizations have sprung up in Cuba. On one hand, they feel encouraged that Raul's daughter, Mariela Castro, has been promoting homosexual rights, such as allowing sex change operations, but on the other hand, they feel that the GOC has done nothing to end workplace discrimination and police harassment. Their members were not invited to Mariela Castro's much publicized "rally against homophobia" on May 17. The organizations are very active in doing things like traveling around the country and documenting cases of violence against homosexuals, assisting AIDS patients, and doing teach-ins at universities for both gay and straight students. They regard themselves as non-political and have little or no ties with other opposition groups. It is noteworthy that by and large the members are young and racially diverse. As opposed to other dissident organizations, the membership includes several active university students. Social prejudice against gays in Cuba is very strong. In many instances, families throw out of their homes their gay children, sometimes as young as 14 and 15, and leave them to fend for themselves on the street, without incurring any criticism. The Cuban groups feel very inspired by the efforts of gay organizations in the US that fight for political and social rights. The Unity Coalition, a Florida based homosexual rights organization, encouraged the groups to organize the march. The Cuban gay groups clearly were not aware that the GOC of Cuba is expert at identifying leadership and swiftly making sure that no unauthorized protest takes place. Mariela Castro may preach tolerance in the international media, but the GOC tolerates no challenges to its authority, regardless of whether or not that challenge is politically motivated.

PARMLY